

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH BRIGADIER GENERAL MICHAEL NEVIN,
177TH MILITARY POLICE BRIGADE, JOINT TASK FORCE 134, VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM
IRAQ MODERATOR: CHARLES "JACK" HOLT, CHIEF, NEW MEDIA OPERATIONS, OASD PA TIME:
10:30 A.M. EST DATE: TUESDAY, MARCH 4, 2008

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GEN. NEVIN: (In progress) -- secure in Iraq were a lot different from
where they are now. The overview of detention then was it was in a state where
you could call it a strategic risk. The facilities had large numbers of
detainees that weren't fully understood, not terribly satisfied with their
conditions. They weren't being talked with, not getting communication from the
coalition forces. They didn't have access to information; very few family
visits going on. The situation was tense, with violent outbreaks, a few riots,
and some burning of buildings, and it looked like a pretty wild, chaotic
situation.

And General Stone, Major General Doug Stone, took over detainee
operations beginning in May. He spent about the month of April studying it,
traveling around, learning about the history here in the region, what had been
going on with detention operations, and came up with some ideas. One of the
things he determined right up front, he wanted to turn this around from being a
strategic risk to a strategic advantage. And he early on recognized that the
way that the conflict had gone and the way the politics and everything was going
in the region, that those in detention someday were going to be released, that
they were going to be getting out and going back to society. And he determined
that it was his responsibility and our responsibility to use what assets we have
available to prepare these detainees for that individual release.

He saw a number of things that he thought needed to be improved or
turned around and began instituting improvements in whole new programs. I think
the first thing that he brought probably had the most impact, and that was the
Multinational Forces Review Committee, which we just called the MNFRC for short,
where detainees have the opportunity to appear before a committee of officers to
present evidence, make statements, present a case to explain for themselves why
they should no longer be held in coalition forces custody.

Prior to this, any review of cases to determine if someone was going to
be retained in custody was done just as a records review, and the detainees
really had no evidence, no way to know for sure that their cases were being
looked at, that anyone was considering whether they should be retained in
custody or not. And the opportunity to speak for themselves, they found to be
very satisfying.

And immediately there was a reduction in detainee-on-detainee assaults in the (TIF ?), a reduction in any kind of disturbance or anything approaching a riot, far fewer assaults on the guard force. The detainees were very satisfied that they were getting a chance to speak for themselves and having a fair shake of things.

And General Stone since then has implemented many other programs -- literacy programs, basic education, all schooling tied in with Iraq's Ministry of Education, so that they can earn actual grade levels and certificates. He's brought in religious discussion programs where detainees get to sit down with recognized clerics and discuss religious topics, go through the Koran and reach their own interpretation of things.

And I think the sum of all the edification and education that's going on there is to build up these detainees, to prepare them to go back into society and be better citizens, but also give them a chance to improve their reading skills and be able to engage the world more efficiently or effectively and be able to think for themselves.

And they've participated voluntarily in all these programs. No one's been compelled for any reason to participate. And more than half of them do participate in programs. And there's other programs, but essentially the effect of all of this has been detainees being seen as less of a security risk. We're able to release the right detainees, people that are ready to go out and return to society. Right now, out of 1,000 detainees that we released, less than two of them are recaptured. So they're coming out of our facilities, going back into society, and so far being good citizens.

And I'm ready to discuss further and engage any questions.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir, thank you very much.

And Andrew, why don't you go ahead?

Q General, Andrew Lubin from the Military Observer ON Point.

How are you today, sir?

GEN. NEVIN: Very good. How are you?

Q Good. I'm sorry I missed you when I was over in Iraq last month. I spent the day with Task Force 134. And I have to tell you, I was wildly impressed with what I saw.

GEN. NEVIN: Well, I'm sorry I missed you too. I enjoy our media engagements, and I get my share of them. I must have been somewhere else that day.

Q You were home, I believe. And in the scheme of things, that's probably the best couple of weeks you had in a long time. Colonel Stone and Colonel Bill (sp) gave me a great tour, and Marty Breaker and the whole bunch did a great job showing me around. That was great.

If you don't mind, I've got some relatively specific questions or some follow-ups since my visit, if you don't mind.

GEN. NEVIN: Absolutely.

Q Great. When I was talking with Colonel Bill (sp), who's doing the outpatient and relocation, how is he getting jobs for these guys? What are you finding on the outside?

GEN. NEVIN: We've got a number of initiatives that we've linked up with ministries from the government of Iraq, and they've got the lead in that. But there's been a lot of interest in getting them re- employed or back to work.

We've worked with the provincial reconstruction team that's here locally, and they've been doing microgrants with small businesses. And we've been connecting them by phone with the detainees -- giving the detainees the opportunity to call in to the PRT office. And they're engaging them.

And one of the ventures was a bakery, and the rest of them are basic -- the others they've been doing are basically construction-like or repairs of improvements of buildings that had some damage or disrepair. And we've continued to work for a bigger public works program to bring something that would span a larger scope of the country, and there's a lot of people working on it trying to get everybody ready to go at the same time so we can take off with it.

Q Okay. If you -- with most of your detainees being Sunnis -- and I don't have -- the exact amount is kind of immaterial -- are they coming out of Anbar Province, or are they mostly coming out of the Baghdad area? Do you know?

GEN. NEVIN: Well, right now the ones entering the population, the numbers are rather small. Anbar Province is a pretty quiet place these days.

Q Right.

GEN. NEVIN: But in the past, the Sunni population has come from -- most of it has come from Al Anbar Province. But they did and they do have some that come from the Baghdad area as well.

Q All right. Well, I was curious, because when I was out there -- because when I left your area and spent the next couple of weeks out in Anbar -- and in Ramadi they're looking for workers. I didn't know whether any people from Ramadi get the local PRTs -- (inaudible) -- start hiring these kids back again. Apparently salaries have gone up, and they're actually short of day laborers out there.

GEN. NEVIN: Well, I think that's a good news story that they've got businesses and opportunities out there for people to work. We continue to release detainees on a regular basis. They are returning to their communities. A And that's a good news story in Ramadi that we can have some opportunities for them, waiting for them in their homes.

Q That's exactly what I was thinking. When I was there, you were going to do a big release. This was the middle February, second half -- (inaudible) -- as I recall. How many people did you end up releasing, and how did it go?

GEN. NEVIN: Well, I'm trying to remember. We've done a number of large releases with participation from the government of Iraq. And every one of them has gone well. There was one on the day that I returned from my leave.

I think we had 306 that day. And we had -- the deputy minister of Education was the guest speaker for that event, and it went very well.

The detainees, of course, are very happy, and they get a good message from their government that talks to them about citizenship and responsibility and lays out for them how the country has changed since in the time that they've been in detention and what the expectations are of the citizenry and what their government is doing for them. So they get a good current picture of the world, and a lot of expectations for them to return to their homes and to society, not become a security threat again.

Q Okay. When I was down in Arab Jabour area, they were bitching and moaning that some of the people you'd released were the high-value targets that they were chasing down. My understanding was that you had -- the local commander had to give permission before you released somebody. Do you know anything about this, or can you get back to me on this in a couple of days? They were less than impressed with the people they were having to chase around, as they were telling me.

GEN. NEVIN: Well, who was it that was complaining to you?

Q This was down with the 130. This was Task Force Marne, Lieutenant Colonel Ken Agee (sp) down at Arab Jabour area.

GEN. NEVIN: You know, we do work closely with the maneuver forces with the corps, who's going out the door and when they're going out. The process for all these releases involves the corps vetting the release list, so they know who's leaving and where they're going to. And they have the opportunity to veto some releases if they have serious concerns about the individual and what their role may be in the insurgency or if the security situation in that area is such that an important person may shift the balance of power or cause some issues, then the corps is involved in that release decision.

And that's worked out very well, because they are doing a really good job of bringing these released detainees back to their communities, back to their families, and having another welcoming ceremony for them so that everybody knows that they're back in town and that the expectations are to look around your community, see that things have changed. Peace is far better than the suffering that's gone on before. It's up to you to participate in the good news and be part of the solution here. And the maneuver forces have been doing an outstanding job with that.

Q And with the amount of people you're running in and out, you're never going to get a perfect situation. I mean, let's assume there's -- you've had, what, 1 or 2 percent. I mean, it doesn't -- the amount of bodies you're running out, you're doing a tremendous -- your reconciliation -- sorry about the word -- is really running well, isn't it? GEN. NEVIN: Yes. Since General Stone's whole program to include the pledge program with an Iraqi judge giving them the pledge to stay out of trouble and obey the laws of Iraq, since we've implemented that full program, less than two out of 1,000 released detainees has been recaptured.

I think that reflects two things. One, we really are working hard on opening the eyes and opening the minds of the detainees so that they can see things differently and have a different approach to their communities and to their nation when they leave, but also the corps and the divisions, the battalions and brigades out there have really taken to the communities, made a

connection with the people out there, and done a great job of discouraging unrest, cutting off the support that the insurgency used to have, and making people feel more confident in their government and in their own security. And between those two things, the violence levels have really plummeted out there and life is coming back to normal. There's a lot of signs of normalcy in the cities and communities here.

Q Are you bringing -- with things as good as they're getting, especially in Anbar Province in the Sunni areas, are you bringing fewer people in, then? Is that being reflected on --

GEN. NEVIN: Oh, yes.

Q -- on the -- (inaudible) -- or people you're bringing? Okay.

GEN. NEVIN: Yes. The intake rates for our facilities are the lowest that I've seen in the last year, very -- about a third of what they were at their peak. The last statistical point that I had on this in a briefing, it was 27 per day that was being detained. So that's way down from a peak of 70 last summer.

Q Exactly. If I e-mail over to Lieutenant Colonel Marshall, over to Rose, can I get some stats on that? Because what I'd like to do is put a piece together as far as showing how things are getting better in Iraq. You're bringing fewer people in at the same time. That would be a nice stat to be able to add in.

GEN. NEVIN: Yeah, absolutely. We have all that information available in unclassified format.

Q Great. Okay. Are you able to -- if not you personally, the people on your staff -- are you able to get to the (RTTs ?) and explain the value of your program?

GEN. NEVIN: We explained what we're doing to just about everybody that we can reach. We teach at the -- (inaudible) -- academy every week, explain the programs. I just had a request from the British embassy to have our program book delivered to them so they could share it with Vice President Talabani, who expressed some interest in detention operations and looking for a better way to do things and had heard that Task Force 134 had seen evidence of it with all of the releases and the success that we've had, wanted to know more about our programs, and they had approached a mutual friend at the embassy there.

And so, hey, absolutely, I'm pleased to provide you with our program book. And we've talked to the new corps commander and his staff. We're talking down to the division level on a regular basis. It's just really hard to cover everybody and get the word out there to all the maneuver forces and people that we'd like to.

Q Okay, fair enough.

Are you able to talk to the PRTs? I mean, the -- I mean, once you get them out, getting these kids jobs is what's going to keep them out. I would think that's probably the most -- at this point probably 50 percent of the value of the program.

GEN. NEVIN: We have had discussions with PRTs and we've had PRTs coming to us and asking for help, for questions, to assist in a referral process. And we've got the one PRT that's located close by at our headquarters. We've had a number of meetings, and we've hooked them up with -- they've hooked up our detainees with -- (inaudible) -- contacts. They were willing to engage them and employ them through their referral network with their microgrant program.

Q Okay, fair enough. Are you getting a lot of support from the government of Iraq, from the Maliki level? How are they helping you?

GEN. NEVIN: We're getting great support from them. Prime Minister Maliki has attended and spoke at our release ceremonies. He has stood there and shook hands with detainees and talked to them and wished them well. We've had several ministers in attendance. The minister of Justice has been here, minister of Education, minister of Youth and Sports. Whenever we're doing one of the large releases and ask for anything from the government of Iraq, they're here. They've offered to provide transportation, provide security. They want to be involved in it. It gives them an opportunity to address these young men as they're returning to society and give them just clear perspective on what's going on out there. And we've had great relationship with the government.

Q Okay, great. The reason I asked is, after I left you guys, I was up and spent a couple of days in Baghdad with Dr. Andala's (sp) crowd, and I mentioned what you were doing there. They kind of said, "Wow, we didn't know that." So I gave their minister of Information, or their assistant, Rose and Colonel Marshall's address and hoped that they would be able to link them up and bring them on down.

GEN. NEVIN: Well, that's a great contact. It's somebody we really need to get hold of.

Q Okay, thanks. One other quick thing and I'll let you go, because I know you've got a busy day. We have the largest mosque in the United States about 20 miles north of me up in New Brunswick, New Jersey. Do you have all the imams, all the mullahs you need, or is there anything I can do for you back here?

GEN. NEVIN: (Laughs.) We have a bunch of recognized clerics that have come in and worked with us, teaching and leading the religious discussion programs. And they do a great job for us. They really grasp the significance of their work. And, you know, one of our focus areas is dealing with ignorance.

We have a lot of people that have adopted extremist viewpoints because somebody turned them that way. And they use old tricks. They'll take a little piece of truth and they'll tie it to a big lie, and they'll convince somebody of some injustice in the world and they'll be able to manipulate their feelings, and then their feelings will manipulate their thinking, and they become extremists.

But the work that our clerics are doing with our detainees is having great success. And I'll tell you -- I'll throw out a little statistic here. We've had one compound where we've got an al Qaeda extremist population in there. We've been working on them, trying to engage them to voluntarily come out and join in the services that we have, our education services, religious discussion, and the (work ?) program.

And I won't go into the specifics of how we've tried to encourage this behavior, but we've had two sets of them walk out of the extremist compound and volunteers for the programs, even though they've received death threats. We had a group of nine about a month ago, and then this past week we had 13 more that came out and volunteered for the programs.

So we think we're having good success. And underneath all of this, we treat everybody with dignity and respect. They get outstanding care in custody with us. We understand the importance of each person. We know that they have friends and family that care about them. We know that they are going to go back to society. And we believe we have a responsibility to prepare them to go back to society. And when we have a success like this where we've had 22 extremists listen to us and give us a chance and join into our programs, we think we're doing the right thing.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir, thank you very much.

We're about out of time here. Brigadier General Michael Nevin, with us for the Bloggers Roundtable this morning. He's with the 177th Military Police Brigade, Joint Task Force 134 from Baghdad, Iraq.

And, sir, do you have any closing comments or things you would like to leave us with here?

GEN. NEVIN: Well, I think my last run there was really my closing comment; just to reiterate that we have a great bunch of soldiers working for us. They get it. They understand the significance of their work, and they apply themselves day in and day out. The thing about treating people with dignity and respect, giving our detainee population great care in custody, is the foundation for all that we do.

We sincerely deliver our services, our educational programs, vocational training and all of that, with the sincere hope that we're going to make them better citizens, that they're going to come out of this detention experience a better person, ready to be part of a free Iraq, and do their part.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir, thank you very much.

Q General, thank you for the time, sir.

GEN. NEVIN: Thank you. It's my pleasure.

END.